

Southern Morocco

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Marrakech

Day 2 Ouarzazate

Day 3 Boumalne Dades

Day 4/5 Erfoud

Day 6 Ouarzazate

Day 7 Taroudant

Day 8/9 Agadir

Day 10 Fly London

Departs

Feb, March, April & Sept (see website)

Focus

Birds

Grading

A. Limited walking, but plenty of action in this comprehensive birding tour

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code MAR01) or brochure

Highlights

- 4WD excursions into the Sahara Desert in search of Pharaoh Eagle Owl, Desert Warbler, Desert Sparrow and Cream-coloured Courser
- Bald Ibis, Tristram's Warbler, larks and wheatears galore plus many other specialities
- A popular mix of charming hotels set against stunning, varied scenery



Moussier's Redstart



Northern Bald Ibis



Cream-coloured Courser



NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Marrakech

We leave London Gatwick on a direct flight to Marrakech. Usually there is a choice of an early morning flight or a mid-afternoon flight from Gatwick. For those flying early, there are two options available on arrival in Marrakech.

For the first, we will be met at the airport and transferred the short distance to our comfortable hotel near



House Bunting

to the old Medina, hopefully seeing our first Pallid Swifts, Spotless Starlings, Common Bulbuls and House Buntings on the way. After dropping our bags and maybe enjoying a welcoming cup of mint tea we will set off to explore this extraordinary city. Just a short distance from our hotel is the fabulous Jemma el F'na square where we will enjoy its fascinating open air food stalls, musicians and circus performances and where we will lunch in a convenient restaurant before taking a guided tour of the warren-like souks (markets). Lunch is

at your own cost but the cost of the guided tour is covered by Naturetrek.

Alternatively, we can arrange an afternoon guided bird-watching excursion to the ski resort of Oukaimeden (a distance of 80km) where we will search for the endemic African Crimson-winged Finch as well as other alpine specialities such as the "Atlas" Shore Lark, Alpine Chough, Rock Sparrow and Black Wheatear. For this excursion we will be driven straight from Marrakech airport returning to the group hotel in time for dinner. The cost of this excursion is £80 per person with a packed lunch included.

For those arriving in Marrakech in the early evening, you will be met at the airport and transferred directly to the group hotel for dinner.

Please state your preference from the above choices when booking.

Day 2

Ouarzazate

This morning, after a quick search for Little Swifts over the roofs of the city, we leave Marrakech and drive south-east up and over the snow-capped High Atlas via the spectacular Tizi n'Tichka pass. Passing close to Jebel Toubkal, North Africa's highest mountain, the scenery will certainly be dramatic and birds might include Booted or Bonelli's Eagle, Barbary Falcon, Red-billed Chough or Barbary Partridge. We will stop occasionally to explore areas that look promising for such species as Levillant's Woodpecker, "Atlas" Coal

Tit, wintering Ring Ouzels or early returning Seebohm's Wheatear before dropping down to Ouarzazate, the so-called "Gateway to the Desert".

Ouarzazate, a former French garrison town, is largely modern but has a superb old Kasbah, once the seat of the powerful Gloui clan, former controllers of trade over the Tizi n'Tichka pass. Here we will see our first roof-top White Stork's nests as we drive down to the nearby Barrage de Mansour el Edahabbi. This large dammed lake acts as a magnet to birds in this otherwise arid landscape and we are likely to encounter a wide range of species which, depending on the water level, might include Greater Flamingo, Ruddy Shelduck and Marbled Duck, various waders, a marsh tern or two, raptors such as Black Kite and Marsh Harrier and even an inland Audouin's Gull.

Night in Ouarzazate.

Day 3

Boumalne Dades

This morning we will have another chance to visit the Barrage before continuing our drive eastwards along the Dades Valley to Boumalne Dades. This is a journey of two hours or so during which time we will see our first ksours and kasbahs (the fortified mud-built houses and villages) so typical of the region. The Dades valley is particularly beautiful at this time of year with the bright green of the barley fields and the white of the almond blossom along the valley floor providing a refreshing contrast to the stark desert landscape all around. En-route we will look for our first desert birds which might well include Long-legged Buzzard, Cream-coloured Courser, Desert and Thekla Larks, White-crowned and Black Wheatears, Trumpeter Finch and, if we are lucky, Mourning Wheatear or the superb Moussier's Redstart.



From our base at Boumalne Dades we are well positioned to explore the varied habitats nearby. In the Dades gorge in the southern foothills of the High Atlas are the most spectacular rock formations and dramatically positioned ksours and kasbahs. The shady groves along the river here ring with the songs of Bulbuls, Serins and Cetti's Warblers whilst Swallowtail butterflies glide gracefully from one patch of sun to another. Amongst the rocks and crags above we will look for a range of birds including Bonelli's Eagle, Tristram's Warbler, Crag Martin, Blue Rock-Thrush, Black Wheatear, Rock Bunting and Red-billed Chough.

Lower down, to the south of the mountains, we will explore the stony plains around Boumalne Dades, especially along the Tagdilt track. The silence and sense of space out on the plain is exhilarating and here we have the chance of such exciting bird species as Lanner, Long-legged Buzzard, Cream-coloured Courser, Crowned and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Temminck's Lark, Red-rumped and Desert Wheatears, and, if we are lucky, Thick-billed Lark and even the extremely rare Houbara Bustard. We will also look out for the Fat Sand Rat which is common here (a food source for the local Long-legged Buzzards) and the dainty little Greenish Black-tip, one of the few butterflies able to survive in this harsh environment.

Night Boumalne Dades

Day 4 – 5

Erfoud

We will spend this morning taking another look at the Tagdilt Plain, Maharra Plain or generally trying to find any species missed thus far.



In the afternoon we will continue our journey eastwards through increasingly desolate landscapes to Erfoud, a frontier town on the edge of the desert about 160 miles from Boulmalne. The oases, gardens and palm groves around Erfoud, and the sandy wadis and stony desert nearby all offer rewarding birding with Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and a range of migrants, such as Rufous Bush Chats, being particularly notable in our late March/April tours.

The first great sand dunes of the Sahara at Merzouga, a one-hour drive south of Erfoud, are home to Morocco's best range of desert specialities; these include the elusive Desert Sparrow, Pharaoh Eagle Owl, Egyptian Nightjar, Spotted and Crowned Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Courser, Fulvous Babbler, Hoopoe and Bar-tailed Larks, White-crowned and Desert Wheatears, and Brown-necked Raven. Occasionally we have even seen the extremely rare Houbara Bustard. Our late winter tours (February and early March) offer the best chances of seeing such species as Scrub, Desert and Tristram's Warblers 'wintering' in the tamarisk bushes around Merzouga. Not far from Erfoud, the historic ruins of Rissani, fast being overtaken by travelling desert sands, are also worth a visit for anybody wishing to opt out of the full day birding in the desert.

A stay of two nights here is designed to give you time to enjoy the best desert birding that Morocco has to offer, or to appreciate some of the desert culture and history, in the manner you prefer.

Amongst the options are:

1. A 4x4 vehicle trip into the Saharan dunes (dawn - early afternoon), taking in the magnificent sand dunes of Erg Chebbi and offering the chance to see some of the special desert birds, followed by a visit to the Nomadic Berber Depot in Merzouga, and then (once refreshed) a late afternoon look at the Oues Ziz. Usually the vast majority of the group plump for this option.
2. A leisurely exploration of Erfoud and Rissani on foot (unguided) with shopping in the souks and sightseeing or even a full day at leisure within the luxurious hotel grounds!



One thing that should not be missed whilst in Erfoud in our opinion is the sunrise over the desert. This is also the best time for birding opportunities (and a chance to see such nocturnal mammals as Golden Jackal or Fennec Fox).

Nights in Erfoud

Day 6

Ouarzazate

Driving towards Rissani and then west across the stony desert through Alnif and Tazzarine to the Draa Valley and finally to our hotel at Ouarzazate. Breaking the journey with birding stops and walks en-route, especially for Brown-necked Raven and other desert species, which if we are lucky could include Pharaoh Eagle Owl, we will arrive in the late afternoon in time to visit the Barrage el Mansour Eddahabi before settling into our hotel. Total distance covered today will be about 200 miles.

Night in Ouarzazate

Day 7

Taroudant

Today is likely to start with a short birdwatching walk before breakfast, which may yield sandgrouse or Collared Pratincole.



After breakfast we will either drive towards the barrage on the north side of town, or stop at the Oued Iriri. Both areas can be very productive. Past trips here have thrown up Montagu's Harrier, Black Tern, Reed Warbler, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Subalpine Warbler, Spectacled Warbler, Melodious Warbler and Trumpeter Finch.

Next we travel on through a rugged landscape to lunch at the Saffron Tea House at Taliouine, with its historic kasbah and the saffron producing crocus

fields typical of this region. The local beverage can be sampled while migrants pass overhead on migration to or from southern Africa.

On again, we will notice a gradual greening of the landscape as we travel towards the coast. As we descend through the arid hills we will enter into the remnant Argan forests, a threatened habitat found only in Morocco, and then finally into the Sous Valley where numbers of birds can be seen, including Black-shouldered Kite, Long-legged Buzzard, Peregrine, Barbary Falcon, Red-rumped Swallow and Southern Grey Shrike.

We should reach our characterful and comfortable Riad in Taroudant, with enough time for you to visit the local souk, should you wish. Some previous clients have even enjoyed a Berber massage here! Total distance covered today will be about 190 miles.

Night in Taroudant

Day 8 - 9

Agadir

We move on today to Agadir, an hour and a half away. To the north of this coastal town, the road winds along a beautiful coastline past dramatic Cap Rhir and on to the small Village of Tamri. The area around Tamri is well known as one of the very few places where the Northern Bald Ibis still occurs and a search of the surrounding fields, dunes and cliff-top scrub will hopefully bring us into contact with this sought-after and endangered species. The beach at Tamri itself often holds a large flock of roosting Audouin's Gulls and the surrounding scrub buzzes with song-flying Sardinian Warblers.

Heading back south along the coast and after checking into our very pleasant hotel, we will visit the Oued Souss immediately to the south of Agadir. This small estuary supports large numbers of birds which could well include Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, waders such as Avocets, Black-winged Stilts and Kentish Plovers, Audouin's and Mediterranean Gulls, and terns that regularly include Lesser Crested. The drier areas of salt marsh often hide Stone Curlew whilst the areas of scrub can hold the noisy but elusive Black-crowned Tchagra. Before returning for our evening meal we may attempt to see Red Necked Nightjar at the Royal Palace entrance.

Our last full day in the environs of Agadir will enable us to explore a range of prime birding sites within



Black-crowned Tchagra

easy reach of the city. We will definitely spend time at the Oued Massa lagoon a short distance to the south of Agadir. This small wetland is one of the most exciting birdwatching sites in Morocco, comprising a rich mosaic of water, reeds, marsh, irrigated farmland and scrub covered dunes. Amongst a wide variety of birds, and depending on the time of year, we have a good chance of finding such spectacular and unusual species as Glossy Ibis, Squacco and Purple Herons, Common Crane, Marbled Duck, Osprey, Black-shouldered Kite, Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Plain Martin. Black-crowned Tchagras whistle madly from

the scrub, Moussier's Redstarts are common and even Bonelli's Eagle is fairly regular. Almost anything could turn up here and the chance of finding a vagrant from southern Africa or the Americas adds to the excitement of this locality. On past trips we have found African Skimmer, Brown Booby, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Ring-billed Gull and Long-billed Dowitcher.

Nights in Agadir

Day 10

Fly London

Usually we are able to take Easyjet's direct flight from Agadir back to London in the evening, using any time available to continue our explorations of Morocco's Atlantic coastline. In the unlikely event of this flight being unavailable, we will take a morning drive back to Marrakech (150 miles) which will take us first across the scenic western end of the High Atlas and then across an area of dry stony arable steppe. Watching out for migrant Black Kites and Lesser Kestrels and singing Calandra Larks we will make a last stop for coffee here before arriving in Marrakech in time for our flight back to London.

Tour Grading

This is a grade A holiday, constituting a traditional birdwatching tour. We will be using a minibus to visit each site, walking at a very gentle pace at each one, and over relatively short distances as we search for the birds of southern Morocco's deserts, oases and wetlands. We cover a fair amount of mileage on this tour; a necessity if we're going to show you the best of southern Morocco in 10 days. The longer drives are interspersed with birding stops.

Weather

February, March, April and September are lovely times of the year to visit southern Morocco. Skies are generally clear with excellent visibility, allowing fine views of snow-covered mountain ranges. You can expect plenty of sunshine and daytime temperatures usually in the 70's (Fahrenheit), with cool, but not cold, nights. It is generally fairly dry during these months. February, followed by March, will be the coolest month (hats, gloves and fleeces necessary for the mountain pass and early mornings on the steppes), with April and September somewhat warmer.

Clothing

Please inspect carefully the separate clothing list in your pre-departure information. Clean casual clothes will be necessary for hotel wear. Plenty of warm clothes will be needed for the autumn and early spring tours.

Food & accommodation

Accommodation and all meals are included throughout this holiday (except lunches on Day 1 as described). We use comfortable hotels; generally the best available in the areas we visit.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include all items of a more personal nature such as drinks, laundry, souvenirs and tips.

Booking your place on the tour

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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